

File Note 152

Nicola L.

Essay by
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Camden Art Centre
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Under Her Skin

At some point during your childhood you will likely have learned about the hermit crab, the little crustacean that looks for a home in the abandoned carapaces of other sea organisms. You might have discovered that these nomadic creatures often select a scavenged snail shell—fortified by calcification—to serve as a new, if temporary, home. Every year, the cycle repeats: the crab must scout and approve a new shell with each subsequent shedding of the skin.

The artist Nicola L. was fascinated by snail shells and skin—she produced iterations of each in virtually every medium she worked in. She made snail lamps, snail drawings, snail tables, snail beds, snail chandeliers, snail sofas, snail collages, snail bird cages, snail paintings, snail bookcases, even an entire snail-themed room for the Chelsea Hotel (where she was a resident between 1989–2018). She made skins you could enter alone—famously dubbed the ‘pénétrables’ by venerable French art critic Pierre Restany—and skins that operated as rhizome, or membrane, linking one person to a crowd of other bodies.

In many ways Nicola mirrored the habits of the hermit crab: the skin shedder, the shell hunter. A female artist only ‘discovered’ by the mainstream in recent decades, she spent her life casting about for a new home, a better fit, and more accommodating surroundings. Like the hermit crab, she was something of a benthic creature: a punk heroine of the margins who haunted the halls of CBGB, who made herself comfortable in the tenebrous undercurrent swirling below the surface. It was not that Nicola didn’t crave to be recognised, lionised, anthologised, or enriched, but she was—as far as I can tell from reading her own words—a congenial iconoclast, prone to a measure of caprice and humor, and interested, above all, in heeding the call of her art.

Nicola moved between media pliantly, slipping from conceptual and performance works into the design of alluringly slick functional objects, then side-stepping into writing, activism, and directing documentary films (her film subjects ranged from the 1980s punk band Bad Brains to the political activist and *enfant terrible* of the ‘Yippie’ movement, Abbie Hoffman). Though she was sometimes lassoed into

'art movements' by critics or curators, she belonged to none. Nicola was never quite a pop artist, nor a Nouveau Réaliste, nor a feminist, nor a political artist, nor a designer—though she was, after a fashion, all of these things. Behold, the Brobdingnagian foot-shaped vinyl sofas, lipsticked lip lamps, or eyeball fixtures glowing azure, then observe the political pageantry of her protest placards: *WE WANT TO TOUCH*, *WE WANT TO SEE*, *WE WANT TO FEEL*, *WE WANT TO LOVE*, and *WE WANT TO BE LOVED*.

Critics, gallerists and curators alike found it difficult to categorise her protean output. The work was hard to write about. It was even harder to sell.

Born in Morocco in 1932 to French parents, Nicola moved from country to country, medium to medium, lover to lover, in a state of febrile creativity. She may have started out with a traditional arts education (a degree from École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the 1950s) but she abandoned painting in 1964 after meeting the radical conceptual artist Alberto Greco in Ibiza. At his goading, and following his untimely death, she destroyed her canvases and began a career-long investigation into wearable art, activism, and idiosyncratic, body-based design. One might conclude from her own accounts of the time that she was a sybarite, but one who could, paradoxically, withstand the penurious conditions of life as a working artist (not to mention a months-long stint in a Lebanese prison on a charge of marijuana possession). She was also a mother.

As I begin this paragraph, my two-year-old daughter calls to me from her bedroom—she's having a difficult time falling asleep. I think of Nicola, with and without her two sons, separated from one or the other for months at a time as she negotiated shared custody with an ex-husband in Europe. I think of her dropping acid, her obsession with her work, her compulsive drive to make things, her parade of lovers, her parties, her flitting indecisively between Paris, Brussels, Ibiza, New York City, and Montauk. Nicola was undaunted by change, by having to build a new world for herself and her children out of an empty Manhattan loft. The furniture she designed

became the everyday fixtures of their lives—a Kurt Schwitters-style *Gesamtkunstwerk*, of sorts, but far sexier and much, much more fun. Friends and family sat on lip couches, walked her *Black Body Rug* (1970), stored the occasional dirty dish in a drawer of one of Nicola's sex doll-cum-commodes. In my mind, she crystallises as an Elena Ferrantesque archetype: a woman driven by the creative fire within—the only release is to reify, to write, to make, to fuck, to keep eternally busy. Sometimes a child is an impediment. Sometimes a child is a savior.

The complexity of Nicola's relationships to men makes me think of Louise Bourgeois (never mind the undeniable aesthetic affinities in much of their work). Bourgeois, a mother to three sons, used a vast array of media to grapple with the subject of the monstrous father, the fragile, punctilious mother, the reticent child, and the body, always the body, in all its fecundity, vulnerability, mania, and glory. To my mind, Bourgeois, another transplanted francophone turned staunch New Yorker, is Nicola's undeniable forebear. Nicola, too, took the body as her subject. A feminist who would never identify as such, her work/life (there was no distinction) was a constant renewal of her commitment to the emancipation of her creative self.

With the *pénétrables*, the focus tilts from emancipation to sublimation. With Nicola's single *pénétrables*—such as *Cloud* (1976), or *Earth* (1974–78)—the wearer undergoes a solitary, if slightly ridiculous, transmutation. In the *Red Coat* (an early *pénétrable*, from 1969, meant to be worn by eleven people), by contrast, the act of sublimation moves from the individual to the collective, in the creation of a gender-ambiguous, racially-ambiguous whole. The utopian notion of a shared epidermis—one that erases race and gender—is a commendable, if naive, conceit (though it remains the predominant narrative around this extensive body of work). The *pénétrables* are far more complex. To see a gallery full of Nicola's gleaming vinyl body parts, or the smooth gloss of a commode's lacquer, is to know that she was capable of fabricating objects with a glassy, even machined, finish. The *pénétrables* are emphatically not this—they are crude, ragged, awkward, unnerving, baggy, very handmade. They are at once the mask

of the S&M gimp, the straitjacket of the psychiatric patient and the flayed skin of the sacrificial victim—more punitive constraint than portal to an uncolored experience of the world. They are also the body of the postpartum mother: drained, emptied, soft, used.

In the mid-nineties, Nicola thrilled to the experience of glimpsing behind the curtain at New York City's famous S&M club, Pandora's Box. Her son, Christophe, worked as a cinematographer on Nick Broomfield's 1996 documentary, *Fetishes*, and Nicola visited the set. There, she would have observed that to be enrobed in material, to be masked and bound, is—at least as far as the practice of S&M is concerned—to be unshackled from an identity that impedes self-actualisation. Nicola, a woman artist who in the 1950s changed her name from the female 'Nicole' to the male 'Nicola' to obfuscate her gender, must have found something liberating about this. Subjugation as a path to freedom.

Cast in this light, Nicola's habit of breaking up bodies, or essentialising them—her zaftig commodes—becomes a trenchant, if knowingly drole, commentary on her place within the art world, and within the world at large. Her sculpture *Little TV Woman: 'I Am the Last Woman Object'*, an oversized female form fitted with drawers for breasts and a television monitor for a stomach, displays the message: 'I am the last woman object. You can take my lips, touch my breasts, caress my stomach, my sex. But I repeat it, it is the last time.' This, in 1969, came five years before the young Marina Abramović would stand in a gallery with 72 items laid out on a trestle table and invite the public to use them on her in any way they wished. Some items were benign: a feather, an apple, olive oil, a branch of rosemary; others not: a loaded gun. 'I am the object,' she proclaimed. At the end of six hours, Abramović was dripping with blood; she had been manipulated, violated, toyed with, even tortured. 'It is the last time'... you can hear Nicola's words ringing.

Nothing objectifies a woman more than motherhood—birthing and feeding a child from your body renders you a literal functional design. Our bodies are, after all, evolutionarily calibrated for this

purpose. Motherhood might be the supreme act of subjugation, but it can also be generative. It teaches you—as Nicola so brilliantly investigated—about all the versions of a self that can exist in one body, all the versions of a self that can exist in one skin.

Fanny Singer is a writer, critic, and art historian based in Los Angeles, California. Her first book, *Always Home*, was published by Knopf in 2020. She holds a PhD in History of Art from the University of Cambridge on the subject of the Pop artist Richard Hamilton's late works. In 2016, she founded an artisanal homeware design brand, Permanent Collection, to serve as a platform for collaboration with contemporary artists and designers. She regularly contributes to publications including *E-flux Agenda*, *Frieze* and *Artforum*.

Reading List

André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove Press, 1928)

René Char, *Fureur et Mystère* [*Furor and Mystery*] (Paris: Gallimard, 1948)

René Char, *The Dawn Breakers* [Originally published as *Les Matinaux*, 1950] (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 1992)

Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London: Pluto Press, 1989)

Raúl Damonte Copi, *Le Bal des Folles* [The Fool's Ball] (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1978)

Raúl Damonte Copi, *Las Viejas Putas* [The Old Whores] (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1982)

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* [Originally published as *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949] (London: Penguin Vintage Classics, 2015)

Marguerite Duras, *The Lover* [Originally published as *L'Amant*, 1984] (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998)

Paul Éluard, *Mourir de ne pas Mourir* [To Die of not Dying] (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924)

Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Argentina: Editorial Sudamericana, 1967)

Jean Genet, *The Maids* [Originally published as *Les Bonnes*, 1947] (London: Faber & Faber, 2009)

Jean Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show* [Originally published as *Les Nègres: Clownerie*, 1958] (New York: Grove Atlantic, 1994)

Allen Ginsberg, *The Fall of America: Poems of These States 1965-1971* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1972)

Gary Indiana, *Depraved Indifference* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002)

Gary Indiana, *Do Everything in the Dark* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003)

D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 1957)

Ishmael Reed, 'I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra' in *New and Collected Poems* (New York: Atheneum, 1989)

Arthur Rimbaud, *Les Cahiers de Douai* [The Douai Notebooks] (1870)

Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems* [Originally published as *Poésies complètes*, 1998] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Boris Vian, *Froth on the Daydream* [Originally published as *L'Écume des Jours*, 1947] (London: Rapp & Carroll, 1967)

Listening List

The Bad Brains
Chico Buarque
Juliette Greco
Grace Jones
Oum Kalsoum
Caetano Veloso

Viewing List

Luis Buñuel, *Belle de Jour* [*Beauty of the Day*], (France, 1967), film

Frank Capra, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, (United States, 1944), film

Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, *King Kong*, (United States, 1933), film

Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, (Japan, 1985), film

John McNaughton, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, (United States, 1986), film

Cable News Network (CNN), *Fareed Zacharia GPS*, (US), TV Station

Gillo Pontecorvo, *La Battaglia di Algeri* [*The Battle of Algiers*], (Italy, Algeria, 1966), film

Michael Powell, *Peeping Tom*, (United Kingdom, 1960), film

Alain Resnais, *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* [*Last Year at Marienbad*], (France, Italy, 1961), film

Orson Welles, *Touch of Evil*, (United States, 1958), film

Compiled by Christophe and David Lanzenberg

Biography

Born in El Jadida, Morocco to French parents, Nicola L. (1932-2018) studied abstract painting at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and spent her formative artistic years in Paris, before moving to New York later in life. Often celebrated in the context of Pop Art, Nouveau Realism, Feminism and design, her multi-layered and expansive practice ranged into cosmology, environmental concerns, spirituality, mortality, sexuality, soft sculpture, activism and political resistance. Nicola L.: *I Am The Last Woman Object* follows a number of solo presentations of her work in public institutions across the United States and Europe. They include: *Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present*, SculptureCenter, New York (2017); *Nicola L., Atmosphere in White*, Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool (2014); *The Blue Cape*, Gallery Twentieth, Geneva (2004); and *Nicola L.: Retrospective 1968-2002*, Galería La Casona, Havana (2002). Notable group exhibitions include *Future Bodies From Recent to Past – Sculpture, Technology, and the Body since the 1950s*, Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2022); *Our Silver City*, 2094, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham (2021); *She-Bam Pow Pop Wizz! The Amazons of Pop*, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Nice (2021); *A Modest Proposal*, Hauser & Wirth, New York (2016); *The World Goes Pop*, Tate Modern, London (2015); *Artevida: Política*, MAM Rio, Rio de Janeiro (2014); *L'esprit du jeu: la collection du Frac Bretagne*, Gyeongnam Art Museum, Changwon (2010); *Elles*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2009); and *Le Corps est le paysage*, Chapel of Notre-Dame de Pitié, Saint-Rémy De Provence (2005).

Her art is represented in the collections of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York, the Design Museum in Brussels, the Frac Bretagne in Rennes, the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow, M HKA in Antwerp, MAMCO Genève in Geneva, and MUSEION Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Bolzano. The Nicola L. estate is represented by Alison Jacques Gallery.

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‘There is nothing pretentious in Nicola’s dazzlingly witty and imaginative work, contrived to give pleasure and to remind us that life is an unending mystery, a gift we share with one another. She believed that we are all connected, sharing the same metaphysical skin. She saw the absurdity of the given and shook us out of consumerist slumber into a flight from the familiar.’

Gary Indiana

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